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SECTION
SIX

Divine, True Soldier Poet

A Young Bard of the Twenty-seventh Division, U. S. A., Offers in His "City Ways and Company Streets" the Happiest Verse of America at War

THE happiest verse of America at war is contained within the covers of *City Ways and Company Streets*, by Private Charles Divine, Twenty-seventh Division, U. S. A. In all the books of poems by Americans in khaki that have appeared so far there has been nothing like it. It is the happiest book of its kind in both meanings of the word; for not only is Divine more cheerful than the others, but his work is more felicitous.

Something of his felicity as a poet is known to readers of *Books and the Book World* to which he sent verses toward the last of his stay at Spartanburg and while he was waiting for the boat at an American port. The poem which has first place in his new book is *At the Lavender Lantern*, a bit of reminiscence, merry and wistful, gentle and humorous, which first appeared in these pages. The publishers have done well to print part of it on the jacket of *City Ways and Company Streets*, for it epitomizes the spirit of the book:

"I wonder who is haunting the little snug cafe,
That place half restaurant and home,
since we have gone away;
The candled dimness, smoke and talk,
and tables brown and bare—
But no one thinks of tablecloths when
love and laughter's there."

The "candled dimness"! In two words Divine has prisoned the atmosphere of such places. The poem is notable for simplicity of emotion and an equal simplicity in uttering it. Nothing could be defter than the blending of philosophy, humor and a little ache of longing in the last two lines:

"I wonder if they miss me, I don't suppose they do,
As long as there are art and girls, and onions in
the stew."

And now there lies before us, as we write, a postcard with certain printing upon it:

"I have arrived safely overseas."

Hurrah! Now, if only "safely overseas," Private Charles Divine may be spared to see and feel as in the past! More deeply, perhaps, but no more truly; for that, we shall make bold to assert, would be an impossibility.

Poetry Straight From the Heart.

In the half hundred or so poems gathered under the engaging title *City Ways and Company Streets* will be found many uncommon qualities, but the greatest of them all is the unstudied accent of words coming straight from the heart, the heart of a soldier, young, unaffected, in high spirits and only occasionally a little sad. Sad! No, that's not the word—"thoughtful" is better.

These are poems for everybody because there is in them what everybody sees, feels, laughs at, muses over. And these things we all share are communicated almost perfectly. On the technical side Divine is rarely at fault. Often he surprises you by high skill. Take the last stanza of *When We Come Back*:

"When we come back, remember . . . the
things we planned to do:
The little house upon the hill with room enough for
two,

The casement with the ivy, the road a winding track,
The little house upon the hill, and . . . and—
when we come back!"

The break in the metre of that last line is like



the catch of breath to cover a half sob. "When we come back" rings in your heart with a subtle change in its echo—"if we come back!" Most poets would have uttered the "if." But the soldier speaking to his sweetheart would not say "if." Divine knew that and kept it out, letting it creep in only by an accent, a faintest pause, the only outward reflection of the thought that grips the hearts of both the man and the woman.

Varieties of Mood.

Nothing is more characteristic of the soldier than changing moods. And no poem in the book better illustrates the way in which Divine has caught these shifts than *The Moonlight Scrubbers*. There are only eighteen lines. Read them:

"Far down the vistaed, tent lined street,
From Blue Ridge Mountains pours the sweet,
Night kissed bouquet of oak and pine
That stings the head like potent wine.
Here soldiers sit bent over tubs
And wash their clothes with rhythmic rubs.
Through leaves, white tipped, each open space.
Floods moonlight; patterned songs and lace;
A silver hush on moon sprayed ground
Breathes music sweeter than a sound.
Where beauty is are loves, desires,
Night's vague and vibrant softness fires;
Adventures brighten in the South
Where romance calls from full lipped mouth—
And see! the lifted arms hang still,
A moment's doubt that guns can kill.
Then scrubbing hands forget the night:
'Who's got the soap! The grease sticks tight!'"

How many a soldier at Spartanburg, washing by moonlight, joking with his fellows, must have been struck for an instant by the beauty of the night, must, for just the fraction of a second, have

had "a moment's doubt that guns can kill"! Quick as a flash the mood vanishes, but no more quickly than Divine can erase it.

Of humor, the rollicking kind, the witty kind, the humor that is contagious and the humor that puts something laughable before us and lets us discover the fun—of this the book has aplenty. Sometimes the merriment is a prelude to dead earnest, as in the case of the South Carolina ducky whose chant makes a chorus for *A Song For Darker Days*: "I gotta rainbow wrapped aroun' mah head,
An' it ain't a-goin' to rain!"

Sometimes the laugh comes from a literal record of fact, as in *A Cook Named Andy*. Andy is a little proud of not having to take the setting-up exercises all the others must go through each morning. He has

"No drills to make, no calls to answer—'ceptin that of pay—
An' none o' them cosmetics that they do to start the day!"

The reader of Divine starts the laugh himself when he comes upon the second stanza of *Verses to a Mule*:

"A mule skinner is Jim, and you ought to see him drive:
The wheelers balk and, statue-like, they scarcely seem alive;
The leaders semi-circle 'til they prance at Jimmy's feet,
And Jimmy leaps politely up to tender them his seat."

City Ways and Company Streets contains several narrative poems of

excellent craftsmanship. *Dickie Dow, U. S. R.*, tells the story of the youngster who became First Lieut. Dowlington and gave orders to the older man who looked after him and bossed him in college. Once Dickie gripped his friend's arm. He looked away. "It ought to be me, instead," said Dickie. Then came a time when

"The enemy pushed us and trampled, as I lay there waiting for death,

When I felt an arm underneath me and Dickie Dow's gasping breath.

'Now steady, old pal, and we'll make it,' lifting me, that's what he said,

'Good God!' there were tears in his boyish eyes: 'It ought to be me instead.'"

Interspersed with the soldier poems and in a little cluster at the end of the book are the poems which tell of city ways, written mostly before the author began to tread a company street.

Divine sometimes, in a stanza or two, photographs scenes for us. *Excitement in the Barracks* and *An American Port* are examples of this aspect of his poetic gift. It is a gift, distinctly. We should like to herald it widely, for though the verse of Private Charles Divine is known to the thousands who saw *Gas Attack* in 1917, to the thousands who read THE SUN and to magazine readers more or less generally his real audience has yet largely to discover his work.

He writes not for the thousands but for the tens and hundreds of thousands. He is the poet of brave and simple hearts, saying the things they need to have said for them and to them. Not only for his sake, but for their own joy and deep satisfaction we hope they may find him, every one.

CITY WAYS AND COMPANY STREETS. BY PRIVATE CHARLES DIVINE. Moffat, Yard & Co. \$1.